

**THE
PRICE
YOU
PAY**

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This book is dedicated to my brothers:
good men to have at your back.

And also to everyone who has ever belatedly realised
what an asshole I am.

What could possibly
have taken you so long?

part one

I'M ORDERING A LATTE MACCHIATO because Didi is dead and that is sad. It's not like horrible sad but it's sad. She was an old lady and actuarially she didn't have long but it looks like someone couldn't wait. It's the kind of thing makes you uncomfortable in your neighbourhood and it's the kind of thing that's bad for business and just fuck it who needs this crap? It leaves open questions is what I'm saying and open questions are upsetting to a certain kind of person and that kind of person is the kind that I am. So coffee while I reflect on this situation that I do not like.

I am all kinds of reflective. I am deeply contemplative of the universe. I am fucking retrospect is what.

Yeah look it up so anyway this is me before it begins. It is morning and I am chipper. I am positively giddy with the love of all mankind because that is how I roll. This is me coming out of my front door and this is me walking down the hall singing a little song to myself, I have no idea so do not ask. I have no idea the sad shit that has happened so I am singing a little song.

This is me in the elevator and now I am not singing my little song anymore because: elevator music. And this is me pushing the button and I have my executive sippy cup of hand-woven organic honey seasalt rooibos and la la la. I am getting on with my day just ordinary is what.

This is the elevator doing that thing that it does shall we close or shall we pretend there is a fat man in the doorway and we must not jog his ass. Today we are respectful of his personal ass space, and so: no we shall not close the door we shall instead screw around. Juddadada juddadada but that is fine. All is right with the world. Even the elevator music is not terrible. Now the doors are closing

and down we go. Eighteen floors and no one else in this building leaves this time of day so mostly I am all alone each morning, and each morning the elevator and I go by ourselves San Diego instrumental nose flute calypso all the way to the bottom.

This is me sipping my hand-woven organic honey seasalt rooibos and savouring the nutty and textured depth of the brew and the tang of dolphin ejaculate and this is the elevator stopping on the floor right under mine and making the ping noise. This is me smiling at the unexpected and preparing for serendipity.

Ping.

This is every single fucking cop in the universe standing there on the seventeenth floor and that is two guys in space suits collecting evidence and that right there is Leo my cop buddy and that means someone is dead. Someone is dead in my building. Someone is dead in my building right under my apartment. Someone is dead in my building right under my apartment in such a way that there are all the cops in the universe plus also Leo and that means they got dead violently and with malice in my building right under my apartment and you just have to take notice of that kind of happening.

Cops look at me. I look at cops. I do not rubberneck. I wait to go ping bye bye.

Oh excuse me sir!

Yeah hi officer hi. Hey Leo.

Oh sir right you know this guy sir.

Hi Jack yes officer I do.

Leo what is this?

You got this old lady down here named Desdemona?

Fuck. Desdemona?

What it says.

Desdemona?

Seems like.

Didi is what.

Didi?

Goes by Didi.

She's dead.

Yes I get that. I will say that she was a terrible person but not so that you would kill her.

Jack you hear anything last night?

No.

Uhuh.

They definitely looking for Didi?

Who knows man but they definitely got her.

I look at Leo. Leo looks at me. I say: I'll see you later Leo you need my statement whatever. Leo says he'll make some shit up. Cub nearby looks a little shocked but we are joshing obviously just joshing like black humour. Leo would not do such a thing and his upstanding citizen friend would not ask him to.

Ping bye bye.

Didi is dead.

I look at my executive sippy cup all the way down and then I leave it in the corner of the elevator. Fucking dolphin ejaculate is not appropriate anymore.

The guy behind the bar is called Mike. He's not a barista, he's a guy who works behind a coffee bar, not because it's authentic or because he loves coffee but because he shot a man in the knee in 78 and employment thereafter was hard to come by. He's pouring my macchiato the way you should so that it comes out in layers: milk, espresso, foam. Pale, dark, white.

Coffee is the judge of a person. Everything you need to know you can know about someone from their coffee, like I am drinking macchiato and why is that? It is the coffee of simple joy like coffee running naked in a field. You know who statistically and disproportionately prefers bitter coffee? Psychopaths. They like bitter food and that is science, whereas I will tell you there is nothing profound about bitterness at all.

No no chocolate powder thank you Mike there are limits.

Yes I did say he shot a man. In the knee. It was not in Reno and you'll gather from his target that it was not to watch him die. It was

because he wanted to express his annoyance at this other fellow trying to steal his fishing rod. It was an expensive one because back then Mike was the king of local TV fly fishing and he had used his second pay cheque to buy at a hefty discount some really nice gear. The next step on his agenda was to go and get a sponsorship deal but up comes this walking pissboil and shoves a knife in his face – not like actually in his face but close enough that he felt the breeze – and la la la.

Mike Sunby – that’s the barman’s name – took the knife and threw it away and then unfortunately went ahead and amputated the pissboil’s patella with a .38 that came serendipitously to hand. The judge said that was stretching the definition of self defence to include basically just being fucking annoyed.

The judge actually said fuck because it was the 70s.

So after that he was a barman and not so much a TV personality because it turns out fly fishing is a namby pamby enterprise with a prudish attitude to gun violence.

I taste my macchiato.

Sunby says: haven’t had anyone order that since 00.

Yeah well Didi’s dead and she was shot like execution style and that requires some sort of fucking in memoriam but also some deep thinking. I do not say that to Mike.

What I say to Mike is I haven’t drunk coffee since 00 either and that is a lie. I haven’t drunk coffee since 01. Between 94 and 01 I was a coffee junkie but also a professional coffee person. I bought and sold coffee internationally and I drank it and I slept exclusively with women who tasted of it. I wore vetiver and black coffee cologne and dressed in coffee shades. I ruled coffee. No one called me the King of Coffee because everyone back then in the trade was the King of Coffee. There were so many Kings of Coffee you could have made a football team. Two teams of pasty desk-assed fuckers with incipient heart problems and bad sex habits. I was the Cardinal. Not the Cardinal of Coffee because that went without saying. You just said you were going to see the Cardinal or the Cardinal thinks this stuff is The Shit – or it’s just shit, or whatever – and people knew

who that was. If they mattered in coffee they knew. All the so-called Kings of Coffee kissed my ring.

And then I was in London one autumn and a friend called from his office, mid afternoon, says: Did someone crash a plane into my building?

Fuck. Are you asking me?

Guy says: we don't know what's happening. They're saying don't use the elevator but we're really high.

Use the fucking elevator.

But they're saying don't?

Use it. (Don't know why I said use it, but I did. I knew or I was too fucking stupid to know you shouldn't. Whatever. I said Use It.)

What if there's—

Use. It.

... Okay. Okay, I will!

Asshole did not use the fucking elevator. Nuff said. So you know what happened next? Apart from I cried the whole week and had to go and see a therapist until 04 and the therapist wanted me to have fucking electroshock to get it done? My fucking asshole friend live-SMSed his journey down the stairs and his last one said just: I'm burning. And what the fuck do you do with that? Why would you text it to anyone, ever? What the fuck does he want me to text back?

He was not my best friend. He was just this guy I knew.

I was sitting in a place in Green Park which is near Buckingham Palace and I was drinking – you know what I was drinking – and I got his message and suddenly my macchiato is ash. I don't mean like ooooh I'm so poetic. I mean like in my mouth I can taste New York air and ash. I'm drinking that appalling ash that's falling from the sky all across Manhattan.

I looked in the cup and it was pale and grey. There was a piece of a woman's purse in it, a charred lone survivor from a gold-strap clutch. The saucer stuck to the bottom of the cup and it fell. It fell dozens and dozens of floors screaming all the way down and then it hit the ground and it didn't break because catering. Fucking unbreakable catering china.

So that was a kinduva life-altering day, is what I'm saying.

Didi is dead. She was a rude old lady and I didn't really like her that much but someone shot her twice in the chest and once in the head like she was a drug mule in some ratfuck town wherever idiots smuggle drugs into this country from these days. I am not okay with that.

My name is Jack Price and this story is about me.

What I do next is go and see Big Billy. Billy knows things and Billy is known as Big Billy because: fuck irony this guy is just so big. Billy has inroads is what I'm saying because he is in construction and also because Billy. Billy has inroads into the traditional criminal substrate like the local demi-monde which is a nice way of saying that Billy knows some lawbreaking motherfuckers and he cannot entirely keep from talking about the shit they cannot keep from talking about because lawbreaking is some kind of cool.

Specifically the construction Billy does is he puts up and takes down scaffolding tubes. Billy is very particular about that word: tubes. Scaffolding is not made of bars, rods, or any other shit. Above all there are no pipes in scaffolding because scaffolding is not a conduit of any kind. Billy hates it when people talk all construction-y at him and then say 'pipe'. Homeowners in particular do this. Billy hates it. He's not a bad guy but he tends to express himself with some emphasis because he like most other men in his line takes a great deal of cocaine while he is working. This makes him impassioned.

The key thing about working scaffolding tubes while riding the Pale Peruvian Stallion – this being the brand of cocaine Billy and his guys are into and the imprint on the little cellophane twists in which it arrives – is that it is a fine fucking line. No not like it is excellent cocaine although it is excellent premium top-drawer award-winning snort-off-Miley-Cyrus cocaine but more like there is a hard limit to what is okay. Yelling at some wannabe handyman is fine. By the time that happens you're all under contract. Less fine is trying to juggle a hundred pounds of rolled steel and letting it go so that it drops two

floors and impales a Bichon Frise. Blow your deadline, crash your truck into the outhouse, set something on fire? That'll happen. But shish one puppy and you are going to have trouble like you've never imagined.

Dropping something on a human is a cop issue. You may go to jail. But a dog? You're going on the national news. Your life belongs to the Million Angry Grandmas and they will fuck your shit up. They literally have nothing else to do.

One of Billy's guys had an unfortunate moment of inattention two months ago which resulted in a near miss. That is to say that a canine citizen was partially affected in an adverse manner by a mid-length temporary stanchion in free fall. That in turn is to say that a twelve-foot spear rolled off the decking and took out an imported corgi's back left leg. And that is to say surgically. Like that.

As it happens everyone involved was very fucking lucky because I was there and I made Billy pressure bandage the dog – if you can believe it he was a corpsman in 03 – and we did a whole thing so now Billy's company has a three-legged mascot and a reputation for speedy good sense rather than pet murder and people actually come looking to hire them because of the good coverage: Veterinary Veteran Preserves Pierced Pooch.

But it's been purgatorio for the whole tube crew in the meantime because obviously they could not be seen to be fucked out of their minds on cocaine during this sensitive period of self-examination and the tender scrutiny of law enforcement. This last was particularly vexed because some of Billy's employees are not entirely or even remotely white, and it may come as a surprise to you in this enlightened age but we have not entirely fixed racism in this world and white cops do still in many cases love the opportunity to be shitty to brown folks.

So all of Billy's guys have been on the narrow. This is actually easier if you take cocaine than it is if you're a dope fiend – not that anyone would hire a stoner to work scaffolding, can you even imagine? – because coke clears nicely in a few days and as long as you have no hair there is really no way to prove you've been using.

Billy's crew are not chumps. They've all been shaving their heads since they signed up. Some of them also manscape quite thoroughly. Hey it's the new century. Fuck am I gonna judge?

The one person who's okay with this drought is Jonah Jones, aka the Whale. The Whale is the resident religious old fart. Jonah tells everyone that the scaffolding gig was better when cocaine was expensive. He's probably right. Back then a tube crew would get well paid and save up. It was fucking social mobility in action. Now they pay for a lot of coke and go to girly bars. High, horny and depilated, they end up in bed with strippers in the same condition and voilà! A new generation of poor hopeless fucks is born to replace the tube crews and strippers when they get old and die. Stagnation, lock-in, death of the dream.

Fucking free market is a prick. Nature of the world.

Obviously the proximate bastard in this situation is their dealer, the scumbag who figured out he could hook a whole industry, lower prices and shift volume. The Pale Peruvian Stallion isn't even Peruvian. It's grown and processed domestically. Locally, even. There's almost no supply chain, so fewer opportunities to leak to the cops. That guy is responsible for these shattered lives, at least unless you're prepared to point the finger at traders and banks and speculators and at the whole apparatus that parcels up life in tranches of collateral so you can fake a profit, squeeze the decimals to produce an illusion of growth. That guy is to blame for everything that happens to and around the tube crews up to and including the severing of a corgi thigh and Billy getting dog blood all up his face while he tied off the stump. Full credit to him: PTSD triggers all over the place and he was stone cold. Billy once saw a man's upper half just levitate off the ground, propelled on its own blood rocket. Billy should not have to deal with blood ever again. That is why he declined the army's offer to put him through med school. They would have done counseling for him and everything, made him rich and useful. Except as it turns out the program was cut so all that he actually missed out on was six months of bureaucratic fucking, but you know there was no way for him to know that at the time. The

point is that Billy should not have gone through that and the dealer is the man who sent him back into battle. That guy is an asshole.

That guy... I hate that guy.

Yeah it's me.

Obviously – everyone knows this now, yes? – obviously I'm not going round to Billy's office with a hundred grand of cocaine in one of those spy-game metal suitcases because I do not propose to spend my life in jail. I don't make deliveries. I outsource that. Used to be you used juveniles and a lot of the traditional dealers still do, but even though you won't usually get a juvenile sent to real jail, if you use the same kids over and over they get a sense of who you are and how you work and then when they get popped that information tends to become public. Kids are loyal as hell but they're also not stupid. They know when to turn you in and they actually don't believe they can die so they're not scared of you. Juvenile labour is a ticking time bomb plus it's unethical. Those kids should be in school so that they don't turn into tube crews and strippers. Which are both irreproachable careers in the abstract by the way but which owing to the deforming forces of late Neo-Liberal Oligarchy are professions whose outcomes are less desirable than those achievable by education and application and a small but crucial measure of luck.

Plus this is the digital age. My deliveries are ride share. They are zero-hour gig-economy microjobs. You want to move a fifteen-kilo file box from the East Harbour to the Point? There is indeed an app for that. In fact there are a bunch of apps and websites and lists and peer-to-peer services, above-ground legitimate regular people ones like City Fetch, which runs collection errands for busy PAs, and IbrokeIT, which gets you a copy of something you accidentally destroyed so no one ever knows, and mesh-substrate private nets for executive couples seeking convivial third parties and white-collar fight clubs and addiction counseling. You do not care about the technical stuff, the point is this: why bother with maintaining

a workforce when there's any number of people who will work on a very occasional freelance basis, without knowing shit about who you are or who the end user is, especially if you can guarantee three things:

a) They are not assisting in the commission of an act of terror. (Deal breaker. You have to make them really comfortable about that.)

b) If they get caught they have plausible deniability. (Not that they assume that you're doing anything wrong, man. But like, in case.)

c) They get paid well for doing something they'd basically do anyway (like commuting, going for coffee in a nearby deli and meeting new people).

You're not inducting newbies into the shadowy world of international smuggling, you're just allowing stand-up citizens to turn an existing downside of the personal economy into a revenue stream. Progress is golden and I am Amazon. I am Uber for illegal drugs. I have everyone from executives in Beemers to old codgers with Z frames running cocaine for me. They know really that this is what they are doing but as long as it is never confirmed they do not care because money and maybe frisson. I do not make them do things they don't feel comfortable with. I do not serve areas those people would not like to go to. I only supply Billy and his tube crew because they work nice areas which is why that falling tube hit a Bichon Frise and not a homeless person. Think of it like I am Norwegian Airlines: I do not fly to any destination that is notably shittier than the airport you take off from.

Today I am not even here to talk about cocaine. I'm inevitably going to talk about cocaine because Billy takes a lot of cocaine and people who do that like to talk about it, but I'm even less interested in talking about cocaine or Billy's erection or Billy's previous erection or the various fucking appalling places he chose to deploy that erection than I usually am. I am here to talk about Didi.

Didi was about a thousand years old and looked older and she was bad-tempered and cranky and she smelled awful. She wore

that spooky doll make-up that very old ladies wear. I met her once coming home and I honestly thought I'd walked into a horror movie. I thought her head was going to come off and bite my eyes out or she was going to explode and turn into cockroaches and they would crawl all over me. I hated Didi. I hated that she existed and she made my building smell weird and she hissed – like a cockroach she hissed – at my girlfriends when I brought them up here to look at the view and screw on the balcony and drink whisky and she called them loose women and me all kinds of words that meant I was bad. I do not blame her for that. She was right on pretty much all of that stuff. I liked that she was down there listening to me screw on the engineered hardwood with Danish models and hating me. I liked hating her and I was pretty sure it was mutual.

Fuck but she was good value for money. If you were in the market for a real ancient monster like one of those clams in old movies that shuts on your hand just as the shark is coming she was one hundred per cent your girl. She was stubborn and mean and awful. And she didn't even get in a few licks on whoever did it. You'd think she would but they were seriously intense about it. Didn't touch her. Didn't steal from her. Killed her. Not a sound. I slept through the whole thing.

See and that gives me the fucking shits. Could they have done that to me? Is that the whole point? Is that the implication? If so it should come with a pointer in that direction because right now I'm at sea. Maybe it's random. Fucking crazed killer acting all international hitman. Fantasy about being The Jackal and she's the secret president of Atlantis, got to die or the sea people will eat Manhattan. I don't know.

Or maybe she was a target. Or maybe I was.

I do not like that Didi is dead.

So this is not my softer side or redemption calling, this is management.

So I am talking to Billy. He is not my core client base any more precisely because he retains this connection with the lawbreaking motherfuckers of this city and very soon now it's going to be time

to cut Billy and his guys out of my loop. They were my first clients but our social circles and our interests may be diverging. Although on the other hand maybe Billy is coming with me, coming upscale. I've been working on that. If he were to redirect his energies the cocaine business with him would dry up naturally, without negative emotions on either side.

Billy figures it is okay to tell me criminal stuff because he figures I must do a lot of murders in order to pursue my commercial project. This is the effect of television and cinema. In my business so long as you don't do a lot of murders and you are careful and smart and you are not leading juveniles into despair and addiction and you are selling to senators and day traders, then no one cares. If the cops even notice you they have better things to do. And if they ever catch you, you cut a deal and they don't have a problem with that because all you've ever done – assuming they can prove beyond a grain or two of it – is meet demand.

I'm infrastructure. I'm substrate. I don't make waves and I am polite. There's no collateral from what I do. None at all. When they decriminalise – and they will – I will go from here to there without doing anything except sending Forbes a press release. Most likely half of them are on my list already but I don't check. Client data is held on their own devices and double hashed because privacy is not something you tack onto a service it is something you build in. I am all about the seamless experience. I am not about noise.

So I ask Billy about Didi.

I say: Is anything going on right now?

Like what? Like construction?

Like warfare or something. Someone moving.

Shakes his head: No. No way. Everyone's happy, it's copacetic. Stable. Everyone's building, everyone's making money. I mean not working people. Legitimate working people in this country are fucked. Am I right? But all the big guys are making money.

I hear ya.

Of course I do. Crime has one-percenters too. And a pretty ferocious middle management stratum, which is another reason to

outsource. Who has time to be taking finger joints in the name of HR? I mean what even is that? Fuck should I do with a finger joint? Necklaces?

The way I do things is about money. Like Billy is doing things now because I told him to. Used to be that his office – the only place I ever meet him, because I do not deliver cocaine to his office it goes direct to the sites – was in one of the shittier parts of town. Now the area has moved up a little and it's edgy and artsy and his brick-and-whitewash interior is a little bit authentic. He was going to sell it, cash in, I said no for god's sake stay in, rent out space. Consult. So now he consults on design, which is to say people come to his office and get inspired and go away and duplicate it really expensively using suppliers he specifies and he gets a cut for doing nothing. Additional revenue streams again. He even owns the salon where his guys get their manscaping done which is double economy because he knows all that cocaine-addled hair gets properly disposed of and not scraped into a fucking evidence bag by a drug squad asshole looking to make his numbers.

I thought about buying that place myself but I don't want the connect. I don't want Billy's guys in my place singing last night's hot dance track and breathing stripper fluids and dropping wraps of the cocaine that I sell them through a variety of really clever cutouts on the floor of a business that does not need to be linked to that sort of thing. I don't want the hassle of disposing of evidence in the form of butt-hair scrapings. It's a bad idea. You don't close the circuit. So I told Billy to do it and if it worked out he should pay me in information and it did and he does. He is absolutely straight with me because there are no areas of conflict in our holdings or lines of business and that is to our mutual advantage and we both know it.

I assume that one day he will fuck me on something and then we may experience a little turbulence. But everyone knows I'm not a violent guy so there's really no need to worry about that. I'll take it out in trade. Whatever. Everything goes better without friction.

I said that to Billy once and now it's written on the inside of the salon's glass window: #withoutfriction.